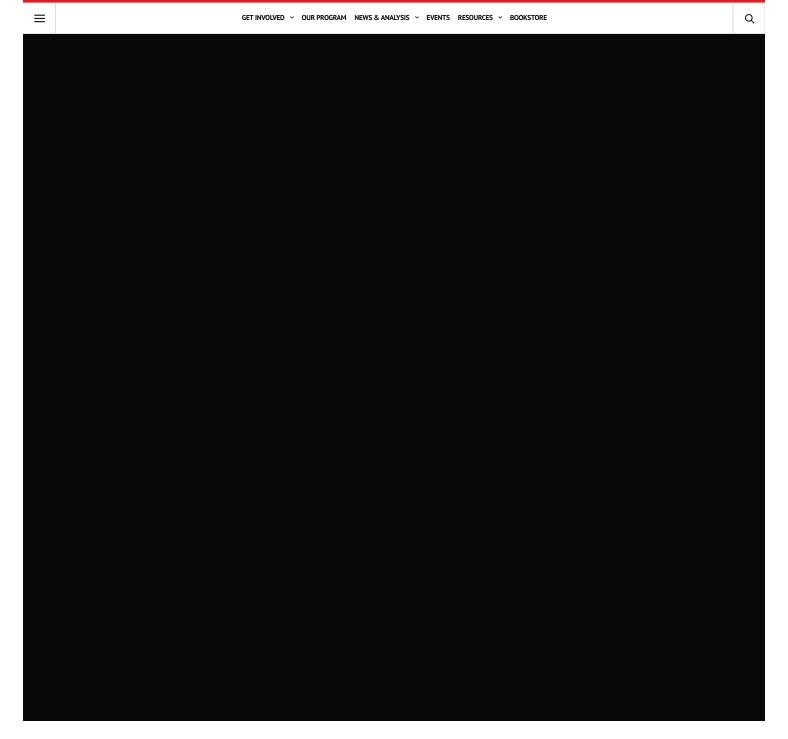NEWS & ANALYSIS ➜ ENVIRONMENT & TECH

Social Media Under Capitalism: Addictive, Manipulative, and Alienating

BRYCE GORDON - APRIL 2, 2018

Anyone who uses a smartphone or social media—77% and 81%, respectively, in the US—can relate to the experience of feeling unable to stop checking one's online presence. Constant, continuous notifications bombard our senses from morning to night, having become so much a part of daily life that most people now take them for granted.

ubiquitous, there has been a quiet but definite trend of articles and books attempting to draw a balance sheet on this phenomenon. Naturally, there is a wide range of opinions on this development, from those who embrace it wholeheartedly, to those who dream futilely of a return to pre-internet society, and much more in between.

The positive, convenient, progressive aspects of internet technologies are obvious and do not require elaboration. But there is significant evidence that, in their current form, smartphones, social media, and the internet itself also give rise to considerable concerns over social life, social development, mental health, control over data, and information flow.

In an article in *The Atlantic* titled "Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?" liberal psychology professor Jean Twenge presents a myriad of statistics supporting her claim that smartphones are a net negative for society, especially for young people. Having studied generational shifts in attitudes and habits across many decades, she asserts that there has never been as abrupt a shift in so many attitudes as in the period since smartphones became the norm. She asserts that a growing lag when it comes to traditional measurements of independence and maturity correlates with the rise of smartphones. Despite the article's moralistic title, Twenge, to her credit, acknowledges that many other factors are at play, that there are many positives to these technologies, and that generational shifts have always occurred. Nonetheless, she concludes that smartphones are hazardous.

A thoughtful, non-Luddite reader might simply dismiss such assertions. But it is difficult for anyone concerned with human well-being and development to read the statistics neutrally. "12th-graders in 2015 were going out less often than eighth-graders did as recently as 2009 … The number of teens who get together with their friends nearly every day dropped by more than 40% from 2000 to 2015." Her research shows sharp declines in social and sexual activity as well as the eagerness to be independent since the introduction of smartphones. This is accompanied by sharp increases in sleep deprivation and agreement with the phrases "I often feel left out of things" and "A lot of times I feel lonely."

Of course, it would be absurd to simply "blame smartphones." However, it would be equally foolish to write off their effect on humans, which numerous other studies conclude is significant. Due to the alienation people always experience under capitalism, intensified by the accelerating state of decay, these trends towards loneliness and a lack of self-care have been around for decades. But the abrupt spike in these trends in recent years warrants a deeper look.

a measurable pull. To Twenge, addiction is inherent to the technology. But this explanation is an empty tautology that explains nothing: "People are addicted to smartphones because smartphones are addictive." There is clearly more going on here.

As for the Left, many mock those who point out the potentially deleterious nature of smartphones and social media, dismissing them as conservative and opposed to progress. They see it as yet another instance in which time and labor-saving technology is greeted with irrational resentment by reactionaries. It is reasonable to defend technological innovation against childish condemnation, but we must consider the effects of such advances within the constraints of capitalism, not in the abstract.

As they have developed under capitalism, smartphones, social media, and the internet itself have been subjected to the pressures, distortions, and requirements imposed on any technology produced for profit. No corporation is exempt from the logic of the profit motive, which forces even the most well-meaning individuals to either abandon their principles or lose everything.

Social media companies try to portray themselves as mere public services, run for the good of humankind. Their architects, when asked why they created their companies, answer predictably with some variation of "to connect people." But behind the lip-service to noble causes, which is necessary to maintain positive public relations, the big players in social media remain for-profit corporations.

We will use Facebook as just one example. Like any corporation in any industry, Facebook must turn a profit or fail, and like any media company offering their service for "free," they turn most of that profit through advertisements. Logically, the companies buying advertising space want their product to be seen by as many interested people as possible, so Facebook collects data on its users' habits and personal interests in order to sell it to advertisers.

Facebook does this automatically, tracking every aspect of its users' behavior, such as how long your cursor hovers over a given part of the screen, etc. They then cross-reference the data with every other user to identify trends and predict behavior. As Twenge points out in *The Atlantic*, Facebook touts its ability to determine the emotional states of users, and even to pinpoint "moments when young people need a confidence boost," according to a leaked internal document.

This is a fundamental component of Facebook's business model. It is only logical, then, that Facebook would want you to use its service as often as possible. The more time you spend on the social network, the more ads you see, the higher their profits soar. Maximizing Facebook usage also allows more time to collect data and predict behavior. Addicting its users—or as Silicon Valley types euphemize it, "engaging" them—is the logical action Facebook must take to maximize profits.

Facebook does this by exploiting any and all vulnerabilities in human psychology, fine-tuning every aspect of the user experience—from exactly how long pages take to load to the exact hue of red that makes notifications most intriguing— to make it as addictive as possible. Thanks to the huge data profiles they construct on all their users, Facebook can target users with extraordinary precision. Armed with teams of design engineers and behavioral psychologists who consider every single detail that might increase dopamine levels and thus time spent on the site, plus the benefit of a sample size of two billion people on whom to test and refine each micro-adjustment, it is no wonder that they have created a product millions of people find unavoidable.

Facebook's business model revolves around the selling of personal data for targeted advertisement.

Apparently experiencing some guilt over this, two notable former Facebook executives—both of them conscientious objectors to social media on a personal level—have spoken harshly in recent months of Facebook's tactics. In November 2017, early Facebook investor and former executive Chamath Palihapitiya told an audience at the Stanford Graduate School of Business that he feels "tremendous guilt" about having helped create Facebook, and that "The short-term, dopamine-driven feedback loops we've created are destroying how society works." That same month, Napster founder and former president of Facebook Sean Parker said of Facebook that "it literally changes your relationship with society, with each other … It probably interferes with productivity in weird ways. God only knows what it's doing to our children's brains." He continued: "The thought process that went into building these applications, Facebook being the first of them … was all about: 'How do we consume as much of your time and conscious attention as possible?'" "The inventors, creators—it's me, it's Mark [Zuckerberg], it's Kevin Systrom on Instagram, it's all of these people—understood this consciously. And we did it anyway."

It should be emphasized that the creators did not necessarily "do it anyway" due to weak character or malicious aspirations. It was simply what they had to do to succeed within the

is the very reason we haven't heard of them.

Smartphones in and of themselves are not especially addictive, but they are vessels for manipulative, habit-forming apps—though the ubiquity of smartphones feeds off of the addictive potential of various apps and vice versa. As we have seen, liberal commentators generally assume that the addictive form these technologies have taken is simply "how it is." They have passively accepted the rise of the "attention economy," an economy in which companies are engaged in a never-ending game of tug-of-war over our finite attention.

Unsurprisingly, opposition to this phenomenon has emerged within Silicon Valley itself, finding its figurehead in Tristan Harris, a former Google "design ethicist" who has "seen the other side" of the attention economy and concluded that it is unethical. Harris and several other Silicon Valley insiders have formed an organization called the Center for Humane Technology to combat what they refer to as the "digital attention crisis."

A glance through the organization's website shows that Harris and co. have grasped the cause of the problem quite well. It explains: "These are not neutral products. They are part of a system designed to addict us." "We can't expect attention-extraction companies like YouTube, Facebook, Snapchat, or Twitter to change, because it's against their business model." They correctly believe that "humane design," rather than abstinence or acceptance, is the solution, and that although there are measures one can take to minimize the allure of these devices, "It's not just our responsibility to adopt better habits."

As for solutions, Harris has suggested in interviews that tech companies need to "rethink" their ethics, "change the conversation," and "redesign" their products in a more humane way. An article about Harris in *The Atlantic* reports that he is even developing a kind of Hippocratic Oath for software designers to pledge to design software ethically and for companies to "rethink the metrics by which they measure success." He has also suggested "a version of Facebook that was built entirely to empower you to live your life," which users could pay a monthly premium for.

Harris has only partly understood the role of the profit motive in the capitalist economy. To suggest that companies should just "rethink" how they "measure success" implies that the profit motive is merely an option for capitalists, and that, instead of focusing on profit, they could realign their values to be more humane. But there is nothing vague, abstract, or optional about how success is measured for capitalists under capitalism—it all comes down to dollars and cents.

Facebook did recently with its newsfeed algorithms. But ultimately, any changes that would seriously minimize users' time spent on the platforms would be impermissible.

Former Google employee, Harris, concluded that the company's practices were unethical.

Without leadership that understands this, the nascent movement against manipulative technology companies is destined to accomplish nothing. Despite their good intentions, the suggestions of Harris and the Center for Humane Technology cannot lead to any significant change. Only by abolishing the market in favor of democratic planning could we begin to structure social media to be genuinely beneficial to humans.

The profit motive is ultimately responsible for the addictive nature of internet technologies, not the technologies themselves. A workers' state would nationalize the means of communication including social media, and run them democratically. On this basis, we could design social media services to serve human needs rather than the goals of a tiny number of billionaires in Silicon Valley and their advertising clients. Social media services could be redesigned from the bottom up with entirely different intentions. Teams of design engineers and behavioral psychologists could pour their energy, not into designing the most habit-forming service possible, but rather, the most beneficial.

Freed from the clutter of advertising and clickbait—which would be superfluous without the market and profit motive—social media would be streamlined and useful. The information billions of people consume would be sorted and controlled democratically, in accordance with priorities determined by society as a whole, not what advertisers and social media executives decide we need. We could have the convenience of instant global communication without the awful side effects we currently experience. It is not unreasonable to imagine that certain votes and other forms of democratic participation in the running of society could be facilitated through smartphones and social media.

Faced with the phenomenon of internet addiction, only Marxism offers a viable path forward. We do not have to choose between industrial society and human well-being. Freed from capitalism, we can enjoy the convenience of social media, smartphones, and the internet while eliminating the addictive overgrowth. Mass production without the soullessness, mass agriculture without

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